

On a noble mission

AIRMEN STILL STAND WATCH OVER NATION'S CITIES AND BORDERS

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Lt. Col. Michael Rouse wakes with a jolt. Around him, the world is chaotic. A loud alarm is sounding and the overhead lights are on, even brighter than normal. He squints against the glare as his eyes adjust to the harsh contrast of dark to light. He glances at his watch. It's 4:32 a.m.

An F-15 Eagle flies over the Florida coast near Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla. The aircraft is from the Florida Air National Guard's 125th Fighter Wing. The wing has a detachment at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Fla., from where it flies Operation Noble Eagle missions — over an area stretching from Charleston, S.C., to the Florida Keys and across the Florida panhandle.



He jumps out of bed and slips into his flight suit, already running through his mental checklist. There is no time for thought, only reaction, as he makes his way to his battle station. A hallway here, a door there, a sprint outside — this meandering course eventually brings him to his goal, hangar number four.

Inside sits his F-15 Eagle. Waiting. Ready.

As expected, his ground crew is there before him, already starting their pre-flight preparations.

‘Way to go guys,’ he thinks to himself.

Reaching the plane, the colonel puts on his harness, climbs the ladder to the cockpit and lowers himself into the pilot’s seat. Before he is even done strapping himself in, the colonel flips a switch and the fighter springs to life, spitting a jet of fire and roaring in anticipation. The colonel looks to his right at the bank of lights mounted on the wall. Only one of the three lights is on — the green one.

“Green means go,” the colonel mutters to himself.

Talking with his crew chief over the headset, the colonel goes through his pre-flight checks, gets the thumbs up and taxis out of the hangar. The flight leader’s F-15 has already pulled out and is headed down the ramp to the designated runway. Colonel Rouse falls in behind him.

Once the two Eagles reach the right spot, the flight leader kicks in his jet’s afterburners and



After getting an alert notice for an air intercept, F-15 Eagle pilot Lt. Col. Michael Rouse climbs into his jet with help from his crew chief, Tech. Sgt. Mitchell Gainey.



Lt. Col. Michael Birkeland gets the green light for take-off during an Operation Noble Eagle training exercise. When an alarm sounds, alert aircraft only have a few minutes to take off to intercept unknown aircraft.



Crew chiefs Tech. Sgt. Gary Holland (left) and Senior Airman Marcus Holling pull a bad central gear box from the belly of an F-15 Eagle.

roars down the runway, metal and air colliding in a blur as the plane takes off. And, even as the first F-15’s wheels lift off the tarmac, Colonel Rouse’s is already shooting down the runway, mere seconds behind.

Off the ground and screaming into the early morning sky, Colonel Rouse glances at his watch. 4:37. Five minutes and some change since he jumped out of bed.

“Not bad,” he says.

He listens as the team receives its mission. It seems an unidentified aircraft has just entered U.S. airspace and they need to find out who and what it is.

“Roger that,” the team lead says.

The duo receives their coordinates and the fighter jets bank off in that direction, afterburners tearing through the sky.

The hunt is on.

The F-15s and the Airmen who fly and work on them belong to the Florida Air National Guard’s Detachment 1, 125th Fighter Wing at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Fla. For them, scenarios like this are routine. In fact, it’s their job, which in a nutshell is to protect and defend the United States from any known, unknown or suspicious threat in the air, 24-hours-a-day, 365 days a year.



The unit is one of several scattered across the country performing this kind of rapid-response mission as part of Operation Noble Eagle.

Born of tragedy, Noble Eagle started soon after the terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center. Since then, American Airmen have proven the operation’s effectiveness day after day. As of March 2007, Noble Eagle aircraft flew some 44,000 sorties and were diverted from patrols or scrambled from strip alert more than 2,200 times in response to threatening activities.



The first of two F-15 Eagles roars out of its hangar during an alert launch from Homestead after getting the order to intercept an unknown aircraft over Florida.



Lt. Col. Michael Rouse runs to his F-15 Eagle after getting a command post-issued alert to intercept an unknown aircraft flying over Florida airspace. The Eagles on alert at Homestead, and other Noble Eagle alert facilities across the nation, are fully loaded with an array of munitions.

And this protection doesn't come cheap. The operation has cost an estimated \$27 billion, according to a recent report prepared by the Congressional Research Service. But it's the intangibles — the lives saved, the buildings still standing, the tragedies averted — that make this operation necessary.

For the men and women of the detachment at the south Florida base, the mission is one they are more than happy to perform.

"Our area of responsibility is, basically, the Florida peninsula and the waters surrounding it," detachment commander Lt. Col. Michael Birkeland said. "So if anything suspicious enters this territory, we're alerted and take off to either investigate or intercept the threat."

To respond to these alerts, the detachment always has two F-15s "at the ready," meaning the fighters can launch at a moment's notice. The planes are fueled, prepped and loaded with ammunition and missiles at all times. Two pilots and a maintenance crew are on call 24 hours a day to ensure they can respond to any alert within minutes.

"Typically, we can be in the air within six to seven minutes after notification," Colonel Birkeland said.

The pilots take turns pulling alert duty in teams of two from the wing's home base at Jacksonville International Airport, Fla., about five hours north of Homestead. They and the on-call maintenance crews live in a small building on the base flightline complete with a kitchen, living area and sleeping quarters. Two hangars on either side house the Eagles.

"It's a sort of an 'aerial' fire station," F-15 maintainer Senior Airman Marcus Holling said. "Except instead of responding to fires, we're responding to threats in the sky."

The threats vary from mission to mission.

"It's so interesting day to day because you don't know what you're going to face," said Col. James Eifert, an alert pilot and the 125th Operations Group commander. "It could be anything from identifying a doctor who lost his flight plan coming home from the Bahamas, to intercepting a counterdrug airplane that's dropping drugs somewhere off the East Coast, to shadowing MiGs wandering off the coast of Cuba."

When one of these situations occurs, the alarm goes off and the fighters scramble.

One way the detachment gets an alert is through a system of lights that tell pilots and ground crews how to respond. If it's a green light, then the fighters take off as soon as they can. If the light is green and yellow, then the fighters hold on the runway. If the light is yellow only, then crews prep the fighters, but they hold in the hangars. A red light kills a mission.

A horn also sounds when there's an alert — a loud, piercing sound that is unmistakable.

"When the horn goes off you get in there, you scramble up and you figure it out on the way out — you start talking to the controlling agencies and then get vectored to your target of interest," Colonel Eifert said.

Waiting for the alarm to sound is what the job is all about — a fact that can at times make for an anxious work atmosphere. But



With afterburners blazing, an F-15 Eagle takes off from Homestead during a Noble Eagle mission.

a solid sense of teamwork and camaraderie among team members keeps them sharp and ensures that when the alarm does go off, they are ready.

"That's the great thing, we all work together and get along so well," Airman Holling said. "We're all here for one thing, and that's to protect the American people and the American way of life. We're all committed to that."

As if protecting the nation isn't pressure enough, the detachment must also maintain a Fighter Alert Force unit separate from its home unit.

"The wing is in Jacksonville and we're on the southern tip of Florida," Colonel Eifert said. "But, aside from the obvious logistical concerns, this really doesn't impact our ability to accomplish the mission."

This is due in large part to a very capable team of maintenance experts proficient in at least two specialties, the colonel said. From ordnance loading and off-loading to tire repair and engine calibration, the detachment's maintenance crews can do it all in-house.

While some may see this total self reliance as a drawback, the detachment sees it as another advantage.

"You see, if we don't fix these planes, they don't fly. And if they don't fly, we're not protecting the skies," Airman Holling said. "So we take our jobs very seriously. We love it and we wouldn't have it

any other way."

A few hundred miles away and thousands of feet in the air, Colonel Rouse sits in the cockpit of one of the planes Airman Holling fixed. The threat he was sent to investigate turned out to be a small charter plane that got off course. So he and his wingman are now headed back home.

"Another crisis averted," he squawks in the radio.

The colonel has time to think now and his thoughts turn to mundane topics.

"Should I go back to bed or hit the gym?" he wonders to himself.

He shrugs his shoulders indifferently and turns the nose of his F-15 toward Homestead as he lines up his final approach.

After landing and performing all the post-flight checks, he decides to take a shower.

Standing under the steady stream of warm water, he lets his thoughts drift. He thinks about his family, food and some work he needs to catch up on.

Then, the sound of a horn shatters the stillness — piercing, loud and unmistakable.

Grabbing a towel and his flight suit, Colonel Rouse runs out the door toward hangar four.

The dial on his watch reads 7:12 a.m. 🦅